



JUMBO JOCKEYS.—High adventurers Jack Wheeler, left, and Sam Oschin are off to duplicate Hannibal's 218 BC feat by crossing Alps on elephant.
Times photo by George Rose

Crossing the Alps in Hannibal's Footsteps

BY PAUL DEAN
Times Staff Writer

Sam Oschin is rich, very rich, rich enough to vacation in Europe on pocket change and have a chauffeur-driven Mercedes slide him across the Alps to a suite at the Turin-Palace and brunch on chamois meat and Barbaresco.

So today, he flies from LAX to climb the French-Italian Alps on an elephant and bed down in a cold sleeping bag after a nightcap of canteen water.

Dr. Jackson Wheeler has all the parchments and prestige to be spending his August at backgammon and think-tank talk in some La Jolla condominium.

But he'll be alongside new friend Oschin this month, rolling and dipping behind the ears of a companion elephant in a two-

man, two-mammal replay of a 2,197-year-old military sneak attack—Hannibal's audacious crossing of the Alps when the world was flat and mismapped as three continents.

Oschin, a 65-year-old hickory rail, and Wheeler, a 35-year-old anthropologist and philosopher whose decathlon life style makes Tarzan a milquetoast, will not be the first commuters since Hannibal to attack the Alps by rent-a-jumbo.

Daring Dick, Handsome Hal, Romantic Richard Halliburton did it as a high-altitude diversion between surviving a dive into Yucatan's Well of Death and failing to

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HANNIBAL

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surface from a transpacific junk sail to Hong Kong in 1939.

British historian John Hoyte tried in 1959 but his attempt—and his elephant in leather walking boots—were snookered by a landslide choking Clapier Pass.

Nor do Oschin and Wheeler see their nine-day, 100-mile hike 'n' ride as a monument scientific quest, a realignment of disputed history, any extreme stretch of physical endurance nor a spiritual pilgrimage.

If National Geographic is interested in photographs and a story, that's OK. The pair has turned down \$75,000 in front money from one movie company. They just don't care about such commerce.

Oschin, with a surplus of youth from tennis and jogging, believes full vacations should never be Mobil-guided by Holiday Inn, American Express and Polaroid, nor endured as six-days-and-seven-nights packages inside a tote bag from Whirlwind Travel.

In deeper moments, he acknowledges that adventure vacations—such as his big-game hunts to Africa and this year's flight to a touchdown at the North Pole—are one way he can examine the real Sam Oschin in raw, genuine environments.

"Living in the field, getting my own food, fending for myself is how I get to know myself," he says.

Wheeler will get from the crossing what he has been extracting from life since he was the youngest person to climb the Matterhorn at 14, since he was the youngest swimmer to cross the Hellespont between Europe and Asia at 16 and since he was the youngest principal on "This Is Your Life" when this life of his was only 17.

His elixir is living every second of life as if he were a terminal patient in indefinite remission—and all the time regretting being born 2,000 years too late while wishing for a millennium lifespan to complete half the things he'd like to accomplish.

"To follow Hannibal across the Alps on an elephant, to

relieve the history that took place there will be an incredible thrill," he says. His hands wave. He's a kid with one minute to choose a toy before being yanked out of the store. "Very few of us reflect on what it is like to be alive, to be self-aware, to be conscious of self. The important thing for people to do is figure out what they want to do with their lives. Then do it. As I do it."

Somewhere in the 48-year span between trying to extract nitrate from bat droppings in Mexico and sipping a well-chilled, ergo room-temperature champagne toast as a tourist to the North Pole, home builder and high-rise buyer Sam Oschin developed a hero and an idea.

In April, he spoke of both to adventurer Jack Wheeler, founding thrill-seeker of Wheeler Adventures and leader of the first \$3,700-per-head sightseeing trip to the non-sights of the North Pole.

"Hannibal fascinates me," said Oschin. "I've always wanted to retrace his elephant route across the Alps."

Wheeler's reply ran into Oschin's statement.

"Hannibal fascinates me," he said. "And I've always wanted to retrace his elephant route across the Alps."

Back at Canada's Resolute Bay Oschin and Wheeler began sketching plans.

Two elephants would be more than token transportation—but Indian elephants, young and female and less fractious than the male. Hannibal used smaller, weaker African elephants.

August would be an ideal month—with Alpine snows and slides held to the high peaks and daily temperatures in

approximate parallel to Yosemite and the Sierra at this time of year. Hannibal went up in the fall.

A budget was drawn—\$30,000 for air fares for two climbers, an escort vehicle and driver, and a pair of elephants (plus handlers) rented from an Italian circus which, should the question arise before junior's next birthday, charges \$500 per pachyderm per day. That, however, includes unlimited mileage.

But what of the route? Aye, there's the route.

Historians have reached fair agreement on the logistics, departure point, destination, distance and duration of Hannibal's crossing.

This son of Hamilcar led a Carthaginian (Spanish) army of more than 60,000 men and 37 four-footed tanks from Nova Cathago (now Cartagena) across the Pyrenees, across the Rhone River, across the Alps and to Turin, Italy, to do battle with Romans.

Hannibal was on the road for 1,500 miles and five months.

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CROSSING ALPS

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Yet Ernie Pyle and Pathe weren't around in 218 BC so Hannibal's precise route across the Alps remains a military secret.

Was it the Col du Clapier, which stopped historian Hoyte?

Was it far north, through the Great St. Bernard Pass which admitted Halliburton? Or farther south across Little St. Bernard? Or was Traversette his doorway?

Wheeler and Oschin hit the books to sort educated second-guessing from sloppy supposition, reaching back into translations of Polybius, Book II, and Livy, Book XXI, and comparing their information to contemporary writings of Hannibalic scholar Sir Gavin de Beer, president of the Royal Geographic Society.

The search narrowed to four possible passes.

Then Wheeler and Oschin decided, with all due respect, to dump De Beer.

He claims Hannibal crossed at Col de Traversette to attack Turin from the south.

They, after examining en route tribal clashes, distances between towns and Alps, duration of travel, views reported from peaks and a dozen other 2,000-year-old clues, have pinpointed 7,300-foot-high Col du Clapier as Hannibal's likely crossing for an assault from the west.

Wheeler and Oschin share a fervor for Hannibal and his achievement.

"What an admirable, epic, heroic, audacious crossing it was and he did it with elephants," bubbles Wheeler. "Not only was Hannibal one of the greatest generals in the history of mankind but one of the most extraordinary leaders ever on earth.

"Remember, he commanded and was followed faithfully by a force of Celts, Iberians, Gauls, Numidians and Carthaginians and somehow held them together."

"Just imagine," Oschin suggests. "For 15 years Hannibal won every damned battle. Maybe not the war, but for 15 years every damned battle."

There is little hope, of course, that the two men will be able to prove Hannibal crossed at Clapier.

More than 2,000 years of road building, climbing, community development and weather will have buried any elephant bones, buckles, coins or swords dropped by marchers during the vicious crossing.

But Oschin is taking along a sensitive metal detector. Just in case.

He, despite an aura of high-rolling lazy-going created by his Wilshire Terrace apartment and a professional portfolio which recently included the \$20.4-million purchase of 10-acre Prudential Square at 5757 Wilshire, remains a high adventurer.

That's the way it was at 13 when, as a bar mitzvah gift to himself, this son of a house painter hitchhiked from Detroit to New York.

Four years later, he was backpacking from Texas into Chihuahua, living off what he could hunt while toying with the commercial possibilities of extracting the 40% nitrate content of bat guano.

While others settle for Jeep trails in the Angeles National Forest, Oschin is blating off-road and across Panama on a dirt bike.

While others are confined to casting for cod from Santa Monica Pier, he's hooking into Africa's Lake Victoria.

But it is the business side of Oschin's life which has built an entree to high places, hence shortcuts to preparing for an Alpine crossing by elephant in just four months.

Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.) has written a letter recognizing the expedition should there be border-crossing problems. Cranston said he'd like to be on the trip.

And last month, one of Oschin's Brentwood Country Club buddies was in Washington as a member of a presidential advisory group. He told President Carter about Oschin and Wheeler and the elephant crossing.

"How I wish I could get out of here and do that myself,"

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microfilm.

HANNIBAL JUNCTION--Arrows show route to Clapier Pass, which Hannibal may have used.

Times map by Don Clement

Carter reportedly said.

The cerebral side of Jack Wheeler is rich with formal learning.

His BA in anthropology is from UCLA, his master's degree in philosophy from the University of Hawaii, his doctorate was awarded by USC.

Yet it's the physical side of Jack Wheeler that shines through the sheepskins.

Color plates in his 1976 book, "The Adventurer's Guide," tell some of the achievements:

"Author on top of Kilimanjaro . . .

"Author with Bambuti Pygmies . . .

"Author with the 'Man Killer of Dalat' . . ."

And there is much, much more to Wheeler whose life is Dooley, Livingstone, Hillary, Chichester, Byrd, Cousteau and Doc Savage.

He's lived with head hunters and shrinkers in the upper Amazon, eaten (but brought his own groceries) with cannibals in the New Hebrides, climbed Fujiyama in sneakers,

executed man-killing tigers and rogue elephants in South Vietnam long before American shots were coming from M-16s, and only an attack by Kurdish bandits stopped his climb up Mt. Ararat to see about Noah's Ark for himself.

This was before turning 30.

And his recent engagement to Jacqueline, a former dancer with the Folies Bergere in Paris, hasn't turned thoughts to tract homes and lawn mowers.

For last year—with Jacqueline alongside—he led a return probe to New Guinea and found lost cannibal tribes, one still living in trees, who have never seen white skin.

Wheeler, no Superman at 165 pounds, explains his life style well.

"To be conscious as a human being, to eye life through a sense of achievement is extraordinarily special," he says.

"The Greeks thought that living well was a particular skill. That's a valuable notion. I think the Greeks were up on us on that one. But living well, as a notion has, unfortunately, been lost.

"I'm not an antimaterialist, but so often people expect possession of objects to give them happiness. I want to possess myself, by living up to the best within me, by living up to integrity, by trying to achieve a deep sense of self-esteem.

"I'm not some mindless person doing death-defying feats. I have a life wish, not a death wish. But, dammit, I just don't want to sell insurance. I want to go to the North Pole."

It follows that Wheeler does not climb, swim, roam, explore or ride because it's there. It's done because he's here.

From this, and in the belief that others share his philosophy or would like to, has come Wheeler Adventures.

When the Hannibal crossing is done, he will move its headquarters from Las Vegas (where his Jacqueline happens to be) to Los Angeles (where he must be because no similar do-it-yourself adventure agency exists in the city).

And Wheeler plans to be more outward bound than other promoters making passes at derring-do by offering rubber-raft trips down the Colorado River.

He definitely will be taking other groups to the North Pole. Then he hopes to point the way for anyone interested in dogging the faded footprints of Ulysses, Alexander the Great, Lewis & Clark, Livingstone & Stanley and even Marco Polo.

Wheeler expects a flock of Southern California disciples. For, he says, too many lives slosh in boredom, cynicism, resignation and intellect expressed as petulant arrogance.

Then he says this. It is a quote that glows.

"We only get one crack at life. It lasts but the snap of a finger. What a waste, what a damned shame, if you are lowered away, for all eternity, without once having your mortal soul purged with the emetic of high adventure."